

THE STORY OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE



This is the story of the Fleece of Gold, and of the Golden Ram, and what he did, and where he died, and how a Dragon guarded his Fleece, and who the man was that won it, and of all that befell him on his way to find the Fleece, and on his way home. Because it is a long story, it is divided into parts. And the first part is the tale of "The Children of the Cloud."

I.

THE CHILDREN OF THE CLOUD.

ONCE upon a time there was a king called Athamas, who reigned in a country beside the Grecian sea. Now, Athamas was a young man, and unmarried, because none of the Princesses who then lived seemed to him beautiful enough to be his wife. One day he left his palace, and climbed high up into a mountain, following the course of a little river. Now, a great black rock stood on one side of the river, and made a corner, round which the water flowed deep and dark. Yet through the noise of the river, the king thought he heard laughter and voices like the voices of girls. So he climbed very quietly up the rock, and, looking over the edge, there he saw three beautiful maidens bathing in a pool, and splashing each other with the water. Their long yellow hair covered them like cloaks and floated behind them on the pool. One of

them was even more beautiful than the others, and as soon as he saw her the king fell in love with her, and said to himself, "This is the wife for me."

Now, as he thought this, his arm touched a stone, which slipped from the top of the rock where he lay, and went leaping, faster and faster as it fell, till it dropped with a splash into the pool below. Then the three maidens heard it, and were frightened, thinking some one was near. So they rushed out of the pool to the grassy bank where their clothes lay, lovely soft clothes, white, and gray, and rosy-colored, all shining with pearl drops, and diamonds like dew. In a moment they had dressed, and then it was as if they had wings, for they rose gently from the ground, and floated softly up and up the windings of the brook. Here and there among the green tops of the mountain-ash trees the king could just see the white robes shining, and disappearing, and shining again, till they

rose far off like a mist, and so up, and up into the sky, and at last he only followed them with his eyes, as they floated like clouds among the other clouds across the blue. All day he watched them, and at sunset he saw them sink, golden and rose-colored, and purple, and go down into the dark with the setting sun. Now, the king went home to his palace, but he was very unhappy and nothing gave him any pleasure. All day he roamed about among the hills, and looked for the beautiful girls, but he never found them. And all night he dreamed about them, till he grew thin and pale and was like to die.

Now, the way with sick men then was that they made a pilgrimage to the temple of a god (for they were heathen people, worshiping many gods), and in the temple they offered sacrifices. Then they hoped that the god would appear to them in a dream, and tell them how they might be made well again. So the king drove in his chariot, a long way, to the town where this temple was. And when he reached it, it was a strange place. The priests were dressed in dogs' skins, with the heads of the dogs drawn down over their faces, and there were live dogs running all about the place, for these were the favorite beasts of the god. And there was an image of him, with a dog crouched at his feet, and in his hand he held a serpent, and fed it from a bowl. So there the king sacrificed before the god, and, when night fell, he was taken into the temple, and there were many beds made up on the floor and many people lying on them, both rich and poor, hoping that the god would appear to them in a dream, and tell them how they might be healed. There the king lay, like the rest, and for long he could not close his eyes. At length he slept, and he dreamed a dream. But it was not the god of the temple that he saw in his dream; he saw a beautiful lady, and she seemed to float above him in a chariot drawn by doves, and all about her was a crowd of chattering sparrows. She was more beautiful than any woman in the world, and she smiled as she looked at the king, and said, "Oh, King Athamas, you are sick for love !

"Now this you must do : go home, and on the first night of the new moon, climb the hills to that place where you saw the Three Maidens.

In the dawn they will come again to the river, and bathe in the pool. Then do you creep out of the wood, and steal the clothes of her you love, and she will not be able to fly away with the rest, and she will be your wife."

Then she smiled again, and her doves bore her away, and the king woke, and remembered the dream, and thanked the lady in his heart, for he knew she was a goddess, the Queen of Love.

Then he drove home, and did all that he had been told. On the first night of the new moon, when she shines like a thin gold thread in the sky, he left his palace, and climbed up through the hills, and hid in the wood by the edge of the pool. When the dawn began to shine silvery, he heard voices, and saw the three girls come floating through the trees, and alight on the river bank, and undress, and run into the water. There they bathed, and splashed each other with the water, laughing in their play.

Then he stole to the grassy bank, and seized the clothes of the most beautiful of the three; and they heard him move, and rushed out to their clothes. Two of them were clad in a moment, and floated away through the glen, but the third crouched sobbing and weeping under the thick cloak of her yellow hair. Then she prayed the king to give her back her soft gray and rose-colored raiment, but he would not, till she had promised to be his wife. And he told her how long he had loved her, and how the goddess had sent him to be her husband, and at last she promised, and took his hand, and in her shining robes went down the hill with him to the palace. But he felt as if he walked on the air, and she scarcely seemed to touch the ground with her feet. And she told him that her name was Nephelê, which meant "a cloud," in their language, and that she was one of the Cloud Fairies that bring the rain, and live on the hilltops, and in the high lakes, and water springs, and in the sky.

So they were married, and lived very happily, and had two children, a boy named Phrixus and a daughter named Hellê. And the two children had a beautiful pet, a Ram with a fleece all of gold, which was given them by a young god called Hermes, a beautiful god, with wings on his shoon,—for these were the very Shoon of Swiftmess, that he lent afterwards, as perhaps you

have read or heard, to the boy, Perseus, who slew the monster, and took the Terrible Head.* This Ram the children used to play with, and they would ride on his back, and roll about with him on the flowery meadows.

Now they would all have been happy, but for one thing. When there were clouds in the sky, and when there was rain, then their mother, Nephelê, was always with them; but when the summer days were hot and cloudless, then she went away, they did not know where. The long dry days made her grow pale and thin,

often his wife would be long away. Besides there was a very beautiful girl called Ino, a dark girl, who had come in a ship of merchantmen from a far-off country, and had stayed in the city of the king when her friends sailed from Greece. The king saw her, and often she would be at the palace, playing with the children when their mother had disappeared with the Clouds, her sisters. Now Ino was a witch, and one day she put some drugs into the king's wine, and when he had drunk it, he quite forgot Nephelê, his wife, and fell in love with Ino. And



"AND THERE THEY MET AN OLD WOMAN, AND TOOK PITY ON HER, AND BROUGHT HER HOME WITH THEM."

and, at last, she would vanish altogether, and never come again, till the sky grew soft and gray with rain.

Now King Athamas grew weary of this, for

at last he married her, and they had two children, a boy and a girl, and Ino wore the crown, and was queen. And she gave orders that Nephelê should never be allowed to enter the

* See ST. NICHOLAS for July, 1878.

palace any more. So Phrixus and Hellé never saw their mother, and they were dressed in ragged old skins of deer, and were ill fed, and were set to do hard work in the house, while the children of Ino wore gold crowns in their hair, and were dressed in fine raiment, and had the best of everything.

One day Phrixus and Hellé were in the field, herding the sheep, for now they were treated like peasant children, and had to work for their bread. And there they met an old woman, all wrinkled, and poorly clothed, and they took pity on her, and brought her home with them. Now Ino saw her, and as she wanted a nurse for her children, she took her in to be the nurse, and the old woman took care of the children, and lived in the house. And she was kind to Phrixus and Hellé. But neither of them knew that she was their own mother, Nephelê, who had disguised herself as an old woman and a servant, that she might be with her children.

And Phrixus and Hellé grew strong, and tall, and more beautiful than Ino's children; so she hated them, and determined, at last, to kill them. They all slept at night in one room, but Ino's children had gold crowns in their hair, and beautiful coverlets on their beds. Now, one night, Phrixus was half awake, and he heard the old nurse come, in the dark, and put something on his head, and on his sister's, and change their coverlets. But he was so drowsy that he half thought it was a dream, and he lay, and fell asleep. But, in the dead of night, the wicked stepmother, Ino, crept into the room with a dagger in her hand. And she stole up to the bed of Phrixus, and felt his hair, and his coverlet. Then she went softly to the bed of Hellé, and felt her coverlet, and her hair, with the gold crown on it. So she supposed these to be her own children, and she kissed them in the dark, and went to the beds of the other two children. She felt their heads, and they had no crowns on, so she killed them, thinking they were Phrixus and Hellé. Then she crept downstairs, and went back to bed.

Now, in the morning, there were the stepmother Ino's children cold and dead, and nobody knew who had killed them. Only the

wicked queen knew, and she, of course, would not tell of herself, but if she hated Phrixus and Hellé before, now she hated them a hundred times worse than ever. But the old nurse was



PHRIXUS AND HELLÉ UPON THE GOLDEN RAM. (SEE NEXT PAGE.)

gone, nobody ever saw her there again, and everybody but the queen thought that *she* had killed the two children. Everywhere the king sought for her, but he never found her, for she had gone back to her sisters, the Clouds.

And the Clouds were gone, too! For six long months, from winter to harvest time, the rain never fell. The country was burned up, the trees grew black and dry, there was no water in the streams, the corn turned yellow and died before it was come into the ear. The people were starving, the cattle and sheep were perishing, for there was no grass. And every day the sun rose hot and red, and went blazing through a sky without a cloud.

Then the wicked stepmother, Ino, saw her chance. The king sent messengers to consult a prophetess, and to find out what should be done to bring back the clouds and the rain. Then Ino took the messengers, and gave them gold, and threatened also to kill them, if they did not bring the message she wished from the prophetess. Now this message was that Phrixus and Hellé must be burned as a sacrifice to the gods.

So the messengers went, and came back dressed in mourning. And when they were brought before the king, at first they would

tell him nothing. But he commanded them to speak, and then they told him what Ino had bidden them to say, that Phrixus and Hellé must be offered as a sacrifice to appease the gods.

The king was very sorrowful at this news, but he could not disobey the gods. So poor Phrixus and Hellé were wreathed with flowers, as sheep used to be when they were led to be sacrificed, and they were taken to the altar, all the people following and weeping. And the Golden Ram went between them, as they walked to the temple. Then they came within sight of the sea, which lay beneath the cliff where the temple stood, all glittering in the sun, and the happy white sea-birds flying over it.

Then the Ram stopped, and suddenly he spoke to Phrixus, and said: "Lay hold of my horn, and get on my back, and let Hellé climb up behind you, and I will carry you far away!"

Then Phrixus took hold of the Ram's horn, and Hellé mounted behind him, and grasped its golden fleece, and suddenly the Ram rose in the air, and flew above the people's heads, far away over the sea.

Far away to eastward he flew, and deep

below them they saw the sea, and the islands, and the white towers and temples, and the fields, and ships. Eastward always he went, toward the sun-rising, and Hellé grew dizzy and weary. And finally a kind of sleep came over her, and she let go her hold of the Fleece, and fell from the Ram's back, down and down. She fell into the narrow seas, at last, that run between Europe and Asia, and there she was drowned. And that strait is called Hellé's Ford, or Hellespont, to this day. But Phrixus and the Ram flew on up the narrow seas, and over the great sea which the Greeks called the Euxine, till they reached a country called Colchis. There the Ram alighted, so tired and so weary that he died, and Phrixus had his beautiful Golden Fleece stripped off, and hung on an oak tree in a dark wood. And there it was guarded by a monstrous Dragon, so that nobody dared to go near it. And Phrixus married the king's daughter, and lived long, till he died also, and a king called Æetes ruled that country. Of all the things he had, the rarest was the Golden Fleece, and it became a proverb that nobody could take that Fleece away, nor deceive the Dragon who guarded it. The next story will tell who took the Fleece back to the Grecian land, and how he achieved this adventure.



Chorus: "D-I-N-G, D-O-N-G, B-E-LL, PUSSY'S IN THE WELL!"